

Macron the Redeemer sweeps to victory

Rebuilding Franco-German alliance

by David Marsh in London

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Emmanuel Macron the Redeemer, after yesterday's sweeping victory, will be the eighth president of France's Fifth Republic, the latest in a long line of hitherto largely underperforming saviours of the French nation.

Macron combines the classic credentials of a smart, reformist technocrat with a biblically symbolic first name. He will need all this and more to overcome the troubles besetting the euro area's second biggest economy.

He must tackle social divisions at home and a widening economic gap with Germany, which is looking on with trepidation at the size of Macron's challenges coupled with hope for a stronger Franco-German tandem.

Macron, 39, a former economy minister who never before held elected office, heads a political movement founded only a year ago. His tender-aged grouping En Marche! fights parliamentary elections in June against yesterday's defeated contender, Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front, as well as rivals from established parties of right and left. After yesterday's wider than expected margin of 66%-34% in the presidential run-off, Macron looks more likely than a week ago to consolidate power in the June poll.

Macron will move into the Elysée Palace as an independent centrist. He will co-opt into his government figures from several parties to burnish his message as a 'one nation' social and economic reformer wishing to resume an activist domestic and European stance after five lacklustre years of François Hollande, the Socialist president he once served. His agenda includes measures to improve the labour markets and public services, buttress links with Germany and strengthen small businesses and education.

One priority is an early meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel to enshrine a common strategy on economic and monetary union and on the British European Union exit process. A behind-the-scenes alliance between the Banque de France and the Bundesbank to stabilise European Central Bank policies on interest rates and quantitative easing has contributed to an improving economic picture that dampened the appeal of extremist French parties.

Macron is under no illusions about the trials ahead. Le Pen doubled the second-round score in 2002 of Jean-Marie Le Pen, her father and NF founder. She will be looking to win the next presidential encounter in 2022 if Macron stumbles.

France's undulating history chronicles an undying search for renewal. Macron's youthful verve invites many parallels, including France's two emperors since the 1789 revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte and his nephew Napoleon III, who took power aged 34 and 40 respectively, but both came to uncomfortable ends at the hands of the British and Prussians.

The most resonant comparison is with Georges Pompidou, the only presidential predecessor to have worked, like Macron, for the Rothschild merchant bank. He was elected in 1969 after President Charles de Gaulle resigned. Pompidou appointed as prime minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas, a progressive Gaullist Resistance hero. He sported ideas for a unifying 'new society' bridging traditional cleavages between left and right, managers and workers, young and old.

Macron has to span a divide as acute as in the 1960s. Chaban-Delmas' magisterial – but ultimately fruitless- inaugural speech to the National Assembly in June 1969 reads like a playbook for Macron's first presidential address: 'Our society must show solidarity with social groups and individuals affected by economic transformation. Our government will combine reconciliation and action... Our great struggle is to uphold man's dignity, to fight against all injustices – in the union of all!'

Pompidou labelled 1970 'the year of renewal'. Chaban-Delmas lasted just three years. He was the fourth prime minister in the Fifth Republic that de Gaulle launched in 1958. Overall, a testament to French

political oscillation, there have been 21 Fifth Republic prime ministers; Germany over that time has had eight chancellors.

Pompidou died in 1974 from a cancer already diagnosed when he took power, his grand ambitions snuffed out by the 1973 oil shock. All his successors since then have campaigned on platforms of national renaissance. None has fulfilled initial hopes. The divide with Germany has widened especially since the 2008-09 economic crisis. German GDP growth has constantly exceeded France's over the past 10 years, with German unemployment falling from 10% to 5% and French jobless rate rising from 9% to 10% – a sobering reminder of the ground Macron must make up.